

CHAPTER 8

SUBJECT FILE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

1. SYSTEM CONCEPTS.

- a. **Definition and Purpose.** The subjective arrangement of general correspondence and other papers has been standardized throughout the Agency. This standardized arrangement is known as the Agency Subject File Classification System. The system is designed to arrange and group general correspondence and similar papers by the function to which their subject relates.
- b. **Applicability.** The Subject File Classification System is prescribed for use by all official file stations that maintain general correspondence and case files. It is intended particularly for use in organizing program general correspondence as described in the Disposition Schedule of Chapter 9 in this Handbook. This correspondence relates to the assigned mission, function, or responsibility of an Agency office. However, if volume warrants, correspondence and other papers regarding the routine internal administration or housekeeping activities of an office also may be organized according to the Subject File Classification System.
- c. **Distinction Between Subject Correspondence and Other File Groups.**
Record-keepers should be fully aware of the type of material placed in a subject correspondence file. The Subject File Classification System applies only to general correspondence papers. A letter regarding a specific contract or investigation not considered to be general correspondence papers of this type is placed in a case file documenting the specific transaction. A letter regarding investigation procedures in general or a letter concerning the processing of contracts in general is considered to be subject correspondence material and is filed in the general correspondence file. The ability to distinguish between subject correspondence and case files or other records is vital to any good files operation.
- d. **Type of System.** The Subject File Classification System is a subject-numeric type. The system consists of selected main (primary) subject titles with related subjects grouped in outline form as subdivisions of the primary subject titles. These subdivisions are known as secondary (second-level) subjects and tertiary (third-level) subjects, as illustrated:

2. ILLUSTRATION OF SUBJECT FILE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM.

ADM - Administrative Management	Primary Subject
1 Policy	Secondary Subjects
2 Reports and Statistics	
3 Committees, Meetings	
4 Organization and Functions	
4-1 Planning	Tertiary Subjects
4-2 Charts	
4-3 Delegations of Authority	

Subject File Codes. The coding scheme used in the Subject File Classification System is called a subject-numeric code. The primary titles are given a short abbreviation which suggests the subject. Subdivisions of a primary subject are assigned simple numbers. Dashes are used to separate the numbers. An example of file codes under this system follows:

Primary Subject:	ADM Administrative Management
Secondary Subject:	ADM 1 Policy
Tertiary Subject:	ADM 1-1 Release of Documents to Public Subjects are assigned file codes to facilitate classifying, marking, sorting, and filing papers. The subject-numeric coding scheme has the advantages of being easy to memorize and having short code symbols.

3. ESTABLISHING THE SUBJECT FILE.

General. In setting up a subject file, always keep in mind that the topics in each outline refer to subjects and that all classifying and filing is by subject. For example, the subject topic "Applications for Employment" used in a personnel office means that correspondence and other documents relating to the SUBJECT of employment applications are filed there rather than the individual applications themselves. The actual applications are filed in a case file series which is maintained separately.

4. MASTER SUBJECT OUTLINE USED AS BASIS FOR ESTABLISHING THE SUBJECT FILE.

- a. **The Master Subject Outline.** The master outline in Chapter 8 is intended only as a reference guide in establishing a subject file to meet the specific requirements of the user. Subjects not specifically provided in the master outline may be added when approved by the Documents Systems Section.
- b. **The Primary Subjects.** The primary subjects in the master outline represent functions of the Agency. Generally, the primary subject outline will be used almost entirely by the office responsible for the function represented by the primary topic. However, no primary subject has been prepared for the exclusive use of any one office. Any of the subject topics in the master outline may be used as required by any office.
- c. **Secondary Subjects.** Secondary subjects and other topics may be elevated and used as primary subjects when they represent the primary function or mission of the office.
- d. **Selection of Topics.** Use only that part of the master outline that meets the needs of the official file station. The system is designed to cover a subject in-depth except in the subject area which covers the functional responsibility of that office. Often, the primary subject topics alone will be sufficient to file all papers on a particular subject if another office is responsible for the function represented by that subject. Avoid setting up folders that will contain only one or two papers. A topic is not usually selected unless there will be 5 to 10 papers filed under it during the year. The ideal average is about 25 papers per folder.
- e. **Addition of Topics.** Add new subjects (topics) only when experience indicates the reference rate and the volume of documents warrant a separate subdivision. The need to add topics usually occurs whenever a subject area coincides with a major function or program responsibility of the office. Make the new subject title as short and clear as possible. Be certain to insert a new topic at the proper level so that it represents subject coverage parallel to other topics at that level.
- f. **Numbering Topics.** When numbering secondary, tertiary, or further subdivisions, assign your own number in sequence under each primary outline. The Subject File Classification System on page 8-2 illustrates the numbering pattern.

5. ARRANGING THE SUBJECT FILES.

- a. **Guides.** Folders and guides should be arranged as illustrated in Figure 6-3. Place folders and guides in the file drawer in the exact sequence in which subjects appear in the office file outline, starting from the top of the drawer, with the guides preceding the related folders. The sequence of the drawers should be from top to bottom of the cabinets. Use the second position of one-third cut

guide cards for subject labels. Normally, active files should show the full file
code number and title of the topic for the first folder behind the guide.

- b. **Labels.** Labels through the tertiary level should be typed and placed in one position only, one-half inch from the left side of the square-cut folder tab. Labels for detailed subjects or breakdowns beyond the tertiary level can be placed one-half inch from the right side of the folder tab. This arrangement improves the appearance and speeds filing operations. The eye can locate desired folders much faster if the labels are in a straight row rather than zigzagged across the drawer. Folder labels for the subject files will include the file code symbol, the title of the particular subject material in the folder, and the fiscal year. Figure 6-3 illustrates examples.

NOTE: When using shelf files, place folder labels on the edge of the folder to the outside of the drawer or shelf.

6. CLASSIFYING SUBJECT FILE PAPERS.

- a. **Basic Steps in Classifying.** Classifying subject correspondence material is more complex and distinctly different from classifying other types of papers. Papers must be read and analyzed, then classified on the basis of their informational content. How quickly a particular document can be located after it has been filed depends largely on how carefully it has been classified before filing. The basic steps in classifying subject material are as follows:
- b. **Read and Analyze the Document.** Read and analyze the document to determine its major subject. The subject line appearing above the body of the correspondence is often helpful in classifying but should not be relied upon entirely. It may be vague, misleading, or even remote from the real subject of the correspondence concerned.
- c. **File Designation.** Select the proper file designation from the office subject file outline. First, select the appropriate primary subject category and then the correct subdivision of the primary subject, if any. If no subdivision has been provided, use the primary subject itself as the file designation. When sufficient volume of paper accumulates on a subdivision which was not originally selected as a subject topic, add the new topic to the file outline and create a folder to accommodate these papers.
- d. **Subject-Numeric File Code.** Write the subject-numeric file code in the upper right hand corner of the file copy.
- e. **The Reference.** Lightly underscore the reference when papers refer to previous papers already on file. This will emphasize that there are previous papers involved. Earlier material should be consolidated with later correspondence on the same subject.

7. TECHNIQUES IN CLASSIFYING.

- a. **Essential Key Phrases and Ideas.** The knack of noticing essential key phrases and ideas in correspondence helps one to select the correct file designation. The subject matter is sometimes difficult to determine. In such instances, it is helpful to consider the correspondence in this light: "Why was it written?" Usually the purpose for writing the document suggests the subject under which it should be filed.
- b. **Previous Correspondence.** It is helpful at times to refer to previous correspondence already on file to verify a tentatively selected file designation.
- c. **Be Consistent.** This is the first rule of classifying. Consistency will ensure that papers currently being classified will be filed with the previous papers with which they belong.
- d. **Unusual Cases.** In unusual cases the subject of correspondence is so extremely vague that it is impossible to determine the proper file designation from the letter itself. In such cases, the classifier should contact someone more familiar with the material for more information.